

BOOK REVIEWS

**NIGERIAN WOMEN IN VISUAL ART:
HISTORY, AESTHETICS AND INTERPRETATION**
Paul Dike and Patricia Oyelola (Editors)
National Gallery of Art, Nigeria, 2004, 259 pp.

The National Gallery of Art as a leading culture parastatal is one of the most dynamic and efficient government organs in the articulation and presentation of artistic creativity in Nigeria. This is evident in the number of successful national and international exhibitions, conferences and seminars that the organisation has packaged which afforded many Nigerian artists and scholars the opportunity to display their creative and intellectual talents. Most striking of all the activities of NGA is the culture of documentation that allows for the recording of the creative minds of contemporary Nigerian artists and scholars. Apart from the continuation of the acquisition of art works as part of the national collection, NGA intellectualises creative activities by engaging in sponsorship and publication of books on contemporary art practice.

This effort at documentation is a product of the refined mind of the Director General, Dr. Paul Dike, who as an astute administrator never forgets that as a foremost intellectual, he must leave a legacy of literature on visual art to serve as a record of events as well as reference material for further research. It is in continuation of the fulfilment of a major objective of the NGA that this book, which addresses an often relegated subject of creativity, is deservedly published.

The book is curiously structured into three parts. The first part serves as a general introduction to the theme, while the second part contains only pictures of works by some female Nigerian artists. The third part, which is the most engaging, has fifteen essays written by Nigerian academics. Attached to the third part are notes and references, a list of contributors and index pages. Apart from the table of contents and acknowledgement pages, the volume has a total of 259 pages. The editors are reputable scholars. Dr. Paul Dike is the Director General of the National Gallery of Art whose penchant for sophisticated analysis and love for research can be seen in the foreword written for this book. Dr. Patricia Oyelola, the second editor, is one of Africa's few remarkable art historians whose knowledge straddles ancient and contemporary visual culture. She is most appropriate as a co-editor of a book on female artists since her credentials in academics override gender sentiments.

The introductory part, aptly titled "Nigerian women in the evolution of Nigerian visual art", is written by Simon Ikpakronyi who is the art historical voice of the National Gallery of Art, judging by the number of his contributions to books published by the parastatal. In a well referenced essay, Ikpakronyi traces the involvement of women in art by analysing the role

of females in the evolution of modern Nigerian art. He highlights the contribution of women to traditional art and craft practices such as pottery, mural painting, cloth weaving and dyeing, jewelry and other decorative craft traditions. His examples cut across Eastern, Western and Northern Nigeria where most of these creative traditions still continue until today.

Simon Ikpakronyi continues the historical narrative by examining the contemporary scene under a sub-heading: "Women in modern Nigerian visual art." He notes that the initial female apathy to certain specialisations such as painting and especially sculpture has given way to dynamic participation in recent times. He divides female artistic involvement into chronological order and highlights prominent female artists of each period and the variety of materials used. Although Simon concentrates on the formally trained artists, he also mentions a few prominent female artists who trained at workshop centres.

He classifies numerous Nigerian female artists both at home and those in the diaspora into specific periods and identifies the nature and place of their training. Out of the forty-eight pages of this chapter, there are twenty-seven full pages of photographs of art works by some prominent female artists. It is perhaps the most detailed write up on 20th century female artists in Nigeria, especially in the documentation of names, training and media.

The second part contains eighty-two full pages of photographs of works by some female Nigerian visual artists. There is an attempt to arrange the pictures in line with the media of production. The sequence ranges from painting to sculpture, ceramics, textiles, printmaking, drawings and graphics. The last few pages are nevertheless misplaced in terms of media sequential arrangement. Each photograph is professionally labelled to reflect the name of the artist, title of work, medium, dimensions and year of production.

Although there are no attendant explanatory notes with the photographs, they nevertheless allow the viewer to appreciate the diversity of media and techniques employed by female artists. The variety of styles and creative strength of the artists can also be recognised. Most of the photographs are in full colour, sharp and creatively arranged.

The last part of the book, covering about one-hundred and twenty-eight pages, has fifteen articles written by eminent scholars and artists. Out of the sixteen contributors, only three are females, an affirmation of the dominance of men both in the contemporary practice and theory of art. The essays interrogate a variety of issues in 20th century Nigerian art, especially as they relate to issues of gender, classification, identity, style, professionalism, exhibitions and curatorial services. These issues are covered by the title, *Nigerian women in visual art: History, aesthetics and interpretation*.

Some of the highlights include the historical and analytical essay of Pat Oyelola who pointedly discusses "neo-traditional" artists and the workshop trained artists along with their formally trained counterparts. Kunle Filani's essay interrogates the issue of gender and

notes that contemporary female talent is usually sacrificed at the altar of maternity and domesticity. He also classifies female artistic participation in contemporary Nigeria using the media and mode approach. For Chike Aniakor and Krydz Ikuemesi, the critique of Nkiru Nzegwu's reaction to "The Poetics of Line", an international exhibition curated by Simon Ottenberg, becomes an anchor on which positions are taken on gender matters. Aniakor characteristically dissects Nkiru's frame of mind leading to her critique of Ottenberg's selection of artists and works which, according to her, transmogrified gender "through a diminution of Nigeria's complex social reality and artistic history." Ikwemesi laments the subjection of females in our society, since traditional masculine pre-eminence still looms large. He however warns against the willingness of some females to use "bottom power" to reach undeserved heights. Jacob Jari satirizes the gender issue without losing touch with the problems and possibilities.

The various challenges facing Nigerian female artists are enumerated in Stella Idiong's essay. Like Jerry Buhari, she notes that there are positive signals today since the female calendar is changing favourably. Mike Omoighe writes on female artists and visual art communication, while Akatakpo and Ubani jointly analyse the contributions of women in visual art to national development. Other contributors such as Efe Ononeme, A.U. Okpara and Okpara C. Vincent deliberate on professionalism, the creative index profile and new directions for female artists. Tonie Okpe's emphasis is on outlets for exhibitions, while Kolade Osinowo catalogues exhibiting female artists in the contemporary period.

The essays bring out the inherent biases for and against women in Nigerian societies. They highlight the challenges facing the development of art in Nigeria, and offer some suggestions on how the female artist can enjoy the same "facilities" as her male counterpart. Adele Garkida's essay on the dilemma of female artists today aptly captures the essence of the issue when she urges the woman artist to think less of how society views her and more of how she views herself in society.

I recommend this well edited and beautifully packaged book to all culture experts and enthusiasts. It will not only make lucid reading for students, artists and teachers, it will constitute a research data base for the understanding of contemporary Nigerian art and the dynamics of female involvement.

—Dr. Kunle Filani
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PUBLICATIONS BY THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, P.M.B. 456, GARKI, ABUJA, NIGERIA

- 1998 The Zaria Art Society: a new consciousness
 1999 Aina Onabolu: symbol of the National Studios of Art.
 2000 Crossroads: Africa in the twilight of art. Essays on African Art and the African Situation
 2002 The development of the National Gallery of Art and the National Studios of Art in Nigeria.
 2003 Nku di na mba: Uche Okeke and modern Nigerian art (text in English)
 2004 Nigerian women in visual art: history, aesthetics and interpretation

Editors of the above (except 2000): Paul Chike Dike and Patricia Oyelola.

THE MARINE MACROALGAE OF THE TROPICAL WEST AFRICAN SUB-REGION.

David M. John, George W. Lawson and Gabriel K. Ameka

Nova Hedwigia: Beiheft (Supplement) 125. 2003. J. Cramer at Gebr. Borntraeger Verlagsbuchhandlung, Stuttgart. 217 pp. 12 coloured plates. 54 figures. Price: 86 Euros. ISBN 3-443-51047-7. ISSN 1438-9134.

This comprehensive survey of *The seaweeds of West Africa* is, in effect, a third edition of Lawson & John's earlier accounts published as *Nova Hedwigia* supplements in 1982 and 1987. It is, however, more user-friendly, being based on a manual prepared for a training workshop for marine scientists at the University of Ghana in 2001, and both specialists and non-specialists will find it useful for identification. Technical terms are kept to a minimum, but those necessary are defined in a glossary.

The area covered is from Senegal along the coast of West Africa to the equator, plus the islands in the Gulf of Guinea. Over 300 species are described, belonging to the Chlorophyta (green algae), Phaeophyta (brown algae) and Rhodophyta (so-called red algae—though these can be various colours from purple or red to brownish yellow or green). By far the largest group is the red algae (occupying 82 pages) compared with 22 pages for the greens and 18 for the browns. Most of the species are illustrated, either as line drawings or coloured photographs. The twelve coloured plates (each with 6 photographs) include some habitat views. Dichotomous keys are provided to identify the genera and species, and the descriptions include information on ecology and distribution in West Africa. The bibliography is relatively short, but some publications mentioned contain detailed references.

—Joyce Lowe

NIGERIA: THE BRADT TRAVEL GUIDE

Text by Lizzie Williams; several pages of colour photos by Darren Humphrey; various town plans & maps; 342 pp.

Bradt Travel Guides Ltd, UK, 23 High Street, Chalfont St Peter, Bucks SL9 9QE, 2005, Price £15.99

The Globe Pequot Press Inc., USA, 246 Goose Lane, PO Box 480, Guildford, Connecticut 066475-0480. 2005. Price \$24.95

On 15 June 2005 I attended the launch of Nigeria at Stamford's map shop in London. As the only representative of the Nigerian Field Society present I proudly displayed the fact on my name-badge as I doubted whether any of the fifty or so present had heard of the Society, judging by their comments to me. They were British travel agents and administrators of various organisations and one important Nigerian. The author gave an amusing account of her travelling experiences by local transport and her initial reluctance to take on the book. Mrs Bradt herself explained why she had asked this South African journalist and tour guide to write it, but she did not say for whom it was written since there is no tourism to Nigeria. Perhaps she hopes the guide itself will generate international tourism by some adventurous youngsters. In former days there were Nigeria Handbooks, but this appears to be the first travel guide. Edition 1 is displayed on the cover so I expect a second edition is already in the mind of the publisher.

Members of this Society, whether Nigerian or ex-pats, will be fascinated by what has been written as the text is candid with 'warts and all'. I am amazed that she travelled so far and collected so much information in such a short time. The first half of the book is devoted to background information: history (from pre-1000 to British rule, to independence, military take-over, the 2003 elections); religion (Islam/Christianity); the environment ('unsightly heaps of rubbish everywhere'); culture (arts, festivals), and much more. Of course the geographical coverage is selective picking on principal towns and areas, but there is a lot about national parks and reserves far from built-up places. Foreign business people, diplomats, and aid workers would be well advised to study a copy for essential reading before arriving in Nigeria. Libraries should find it a useful reference as it is so up to date.

Although it is many years since I was there and the roads are greatly improved, Lizzie's text shows that much remains of the old Nigeria I came to love and the warm-hearted Nigerians are just the same—with lots and lots more of them!

—F. Nigel Hepper (Kew)